Semiotic Review 4: Im/materialities | article published November 2016 |
DOI: https://doi.org/10.71743/cya1dd79

How to Do Things with Things, or, Are Blue Beads Good to Think?

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Abstract: Archaeologists are accustomed to thinking of artifacts as signs to be read. Specifically, some artifacts are treated as symbols, conventional and law-like signs of past traditions and beliefs. This matters for historical archaeologists because we approach these symbolic meanings of artifacts through texts and ethnography. Here, I lay out a framework, grounded in Peircian principles that prioritizes the material qualities of signs and argue that it is well suited to an historical archaeology that seeks to liberate interpretations from the tyranny of the text and a bias towards symbolic interpretations. African diaspora archaeology in particular places great value on survivals, markers, etc., yet pays less attention how these traditions operated within specific cultural contexts. This paper examines beads recovered from slave quarters occupied in the 18th and 19th centuries and explores their meanings—for the people who owned them and the people who find them.

Keywords: symbols; Peirce; African diaspora; archaeology

> What I shall have to say here is neither difficult nor contentious; the only merit I should like to claim for it is that of being true, at least in parts.
> – J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*

Introduction

Archaeologists, to coin a phrase, “do things with things.” The things that others have left behind are the stuff with which we produce new understandings of the past. The point of doing archaeology is to understand the past in ways that are different from, or inaccessible to, other disciplines. Archaeology, then, has a particular role to play in the production of knowledge. The field faces existential crises, both epistemological and political in nature.[1] However, the ideas of thinkers like CS Peirce may help archaeologists to more fully realize our capacity to produce new knowledge about the past that is, furthermore, meaningful in the present.

Pragmatism—the American philosophical tradition that may or may not include Peirce, whose ideas inspired and informed it—has found its way into archaeology through several routes (McDavid 2002). It is a tool for thinking about the consequences of archaeology for living people (Jeppson 2001; Saitta 2003), or the application of archaeological knowledge (Mrozowski 2012). It underwrites an antifoundationalist and dialogic attitude in research (Baert 2005a; Baert 2005b; Gaffney and Gaffney 1987; Reid and Whittlesey 1998). These interventions operate at the theoretical level, but pragmatism has significant implications for archaeological *method* as well.

Kluckhohn presents a hierarchy of abstractions: methodology, theory, method, technique. He separates *methodology* (“the logical basis of all intellectual work”) from *method* (“the sheer analysis and ordering of data”), but in the same essay, argues that confusion with respect to methods are traceable to inadequate methodological development (Kluckhohn 1940:43, 47). Deetz, reversing Kluckhohn’s hierarchy talks about the stages of *collection* of data (observation), *integration* of data to permit comparison (systematic description), and drawing *inferences* from the data so integrated (explanation) (Deetz 1967:9). It is the integration stage with which I am concerned here, a stage that to my way of thinking rightly encompasses both *methodology* and *method*.

One way in which to understand the task of archaeology is to say that it is a way of “reading” the past. Nevermind the fact that, as archaeologists have long acknowledged, artifacts are not texts. Ian Hodder, for example, challenged us to break down the notion of “material culture as text” (Hodder 1987; Hodder 1989). Yet for historical archaeologists like myself, who work with both objects and words,[2] models that treat them as analogous hold considerable appeal. One cost is that the analogy encourages a fixation on the symbolic, at the expense of other meanings. Peirce’s semiotic, and especially the notion of indexicality, offer an alternative (Preucel 2006; Preucel and Bauer 2001), but they are part of a body of thought that is larger than this matter of “reading” “things” and in fact offers new methodological opportunities to archaeologists.

The meanings that historical archaeologists attach to the blue beads found at plantation sites come from ethnohistory and ethnography rather than the material culture itself. Texts tell us that blue beads have meanings and values specific to constituents of the African diasporas of the 17th-19th centuries. Blue beads deflect the evil eye and are part of a larger body of practices to ensure safety and well-being (Davidson and McIlvoy 2012:129–33; La Roche 1994:15; Stine, et al. 1996). We see blue beads used as evidence in arguments for the presence of African-descended people at a site, or as evidence of the African-ness of these very people. Sometimes the beads are used to argue that people are engaged in efforts to protect themselves and their households. These are all interesting and useful interpretations, but only begin to exploit the archaeological potential of these artifacts. These are answers to historical questions inspired by their textual antecedents: who was here; what did they believe; and where did their ideas come from? Archaeology is a weak tool for answering such questions. At best, archaeology may present circumstantial evidence to connect general historical trends and patterns to a particular site. This is what Ivor Noël Hume was talking about when he called archaeology a "handmaiden to history" (Noël Hume 1964). Archaeology, with its attention to context allows us to address deeper questions: what conditions prompt people to seek protection; how did people perceive and respond to danger? This is what happens when we our attention from the question of what blue beads "say" towards what they "do."

When archaeologists look to allied fields (e.g., sociocultural anthropology, history) or related datasets (e.g, oral histories, manuscripts), to ground our hypotheses, we can confirm or illustrate the patterns already established, but we contribute little in the way of new knowledge. This claim smacks of disciplinary isolationism, and one might ask as Paul Kockelman did of an earlier draft of this piece, "Why can't they be enlisted to help explain the patterns you guys find? And don't they often do just that?" Which I answer with another question: how do we know a pattern when we see one? So I first want to address how pragmatism helps us to think about problems and the particular strengths of archaeological data and archaeological methods. Specifically, pragmatism offers a framework within which we may prioritize the material qualities of signs and their contextual interpretation. This paper is an illustration of how several elements of pragmatist thought—***problems***, but also ***indexicality***, ***induction***, and ***consequences***—reinforce archaeologists' capacity for dealing with the material record without violating our theoretical frameworks, or subsuming it to the written record.

Problems

> *[P]ragmatism solves no real problem. It only shows that the supposed problems are not real problems.—CS Peirce to William James, 7 March 1904 (Peirce*

> *1994d)*

Beads, and blue beads in particular, are a problem for historical archaeologists. Over the last several decades they have come to signify an “African” presence. No one claims that only African or African diaspora sites yield such finds, and many archaeologists deny the stark equation of (blue) beads with "Africa.” Even so, the association is re-inscribed again and again:

> Concerning blue beads, Ascher and Fairbanks (1971:8) suggest they are similar to trade beads highly valued in Africa. Smith (1977:161) and Otto (1984:75) propose they are ethnic markers for sites occupied by African Americans. Adams (1987:14) argues blue beads were symbolically meaningful artifacts for slaves between the 18th and 19th centuries. (Stine, et al. 1996: 49)

An ambivalence sometimes comes through in the interpretation

> Blue glass beads are found in higher numbers on sites known to have been inhabited by African Americans...Although two enslaved people resided at [the site], there is no way to connect these blue beads with a particular African American presence. One possible reading of these beads could be as items used to mark individuals as affiliated with an ethnic group. Alternatively, such an interpretation must be regarded as tenuous at best. (White 2008:29)

But as interpretations move farther from the original data and argument, or—more importantly—are taken up by scholars in other fields (e.g: Morgan 1998:621), they often become reified.[3] Such slippage shows that archaeologists may not be doing the work that we are particularly equipped to do. We have only succeeded in mystifying our colleagues in related subfields (Farnsworth 1993). We have allowed the blue beads to become “(in)famous” (Bell 2008:142).

Writing about African-American archaeology two decades ago, Theresa Singleton and Mark Bograd commented that archaeological data were outpacing theory (Singleton and Bograd 1995:29). Now, I would argue, both are out ahead of methods. For blue beads can

be made to address any number of problems. Current theory, rooted as it is in ideas about ethnogenesis (e.g:Voss 2008) and attentive to the lessons of critical race theory (e.g.Epperson 2004), does not contemplate using blue beads as a measure of African(ness), but that is precisely how these artifacts feature in our arguments.

If our problem is the degree to which interaction with non-Africans influences the continuation of African traditions, then we could use blue beads as an index of "African-ness." But archaeological theory has moved beyond a crude search for markers or "Africanisms" (Ogundiran and Falola 2007:17-19). It is wholly inadequate for us simply to deduce that

> *Blue beads mean* [per texts] *"protection" in an African system of symbols*
>
> *Blue beads are here*
>
> *Therefore a person at this site perpetuated an African system of symbols.*

We have framed the problem in non-archaeological terms, which sets up archaeology to provide conclusions that are unsatisfying (because they can never be as precise and detailed as texts) and redundant (because the only new knowledge generated is relatively trivial). Using archaeological data in this way is a bit like using an electric screwdriver to drive a nail. Given what archaeologists are good at, I submit that our best problems are not about the intangibles of tradition or continuity but the material realm of means and ends, the traces of which are discoverable in space and time (Agbe-Davies under review; Agbe-Davies in press). Our theories, which are increasingly critical and contextual, equip us to think about such issues. Our methods ought to be geared towards elucidating them. Pragmatism's priorities encourage greater alignment between our methods and techniques on the one hand, and our theories on the other, by welcoming archaeologists to rethink our problems.

Induction

> *[I]nquiry is not limited to analytic reasoning and is, therefore, not restricted to deduction. Peirce's methodology entails a range of meaningful claims which can be not only scientifically determined but also logical and unverifiable at the same*

> *time. –Wim Staat, "On Abduction, Deduction, Induction and the Categories" (Staat 1993:233)*

For so long, archaeology's model for truly "scientific" research has been (hypothetico-)deductive (Binford 1968; South 1977). However, from a pragmatist's perspective, deduction is only one part of the scientific process. It might not in fact be where archaeology's strengths lie:

> Pragmatism appears to us to be far better suited for this purpose [distinguishing among competing and contradictory hypotheses about the past] than the deductive methods of processual archaeology. Moreover, it may be the only philosophical toolkit that is appropriate as an exploratory tool in archaeology. (Reid and Whittlesey 1998:284, emphasis added; see also Baert 2005a:147–57; Leaf 2003:94)

Rather than building deductive arguments in reaction to ethnohistorical or archival data, we might respond to the material we have at hand and are specially equipped to interpret.

Samuels lays out the following comparison among induction, deduction and abduction:

	process	**has to do with**
deduction	conclusions based on premises using a system of logic	validity (conclusions properly derived from premises)
induction	knowledge from experience based on a system of handling sense data	putative truth (correct descriptions/ explanations)
abduction	guesses about the causes of the thing observed and their continuous revision	conjecture and discovery (what is actually going on)

So a second deductive argument about the beads might run:

> *People used blue beads to mitigate danger.*

> *Blue beads are found in high numbers in slave quarters.*
>
> *Therefore, enslavement entailed vulnerability to danger.*

Shoehorned into a deductive framework, archaeology has succeeded only in confirming what Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, among others, have told us about social relations in the Americas (Douglass 1986[1845]; Jacobs 2000[1861]). Archaeologists are hard pressed to contribute new knowledge about the fact of inequality or the exercise of power in those terms. Likewise, though we could try to account, in deductive fashion, for the processes that influence the blueness of beads (manufacturing constraints, market availability, perceived value, etc.), the number of variables and their potential to confound one another would soon cause such a model to collapse under its own weight.

An inductive approach starts with the archaeological record and archaeology's system for handling sense data. What might an archaeology that encompasses more than deductive reasoning look like (Archer and Bartoy 2006:5–6)? Here is a brief example. In a companion piece (Agbe-Davies in press), I discover that, in my sample of 18th and 19th century sites from Britain's Chesapeake Bay colonies, blue is the most common bead color only at one plantation in the sample, Fairfield. At Utopia II, an overwhelming number of beads are red; at Rich Neck, the most common color is white. Nevertheless, blue beads *are* differentially associated with specific archaeological deposits at Utopia II; at Rich Neck they are not (i.e. at Rich Neck, blue beads act like any other bead). So some beads at Rich Neck may be blue, but we have reasons to question whether they have the same meanings as blue beads elsewhere. Rather than trying to use [existing, text-based] knowledge to create models for making sense of observations, we have used observations to generate knowledge. This matter of whether and in which cases blue beads signify may be trivial on its own, but is a crucial (and to the point of the discussion of problems, above) archaeological premise on which to found further arguments about the meanings of blue beads in context.

Indexicality

> *[W]e observe the characters of such signs as we know, and…we are led to statements, eminently fallible, and therefore in one sense by no means necessary, as to what must be the characters of all signs used by a "scientific" intelligence, that is to say, by an intelligence capable of learning by experience. – C.S. Peirce, "A Division of Signs"*

Peirce's semiotic provides archaeologists with a framework for thinking about artifacts as signs, but not necessarily symbols (Preucel 2006; Preucel and Bauer 2001). Let's consider blue beads as signs in light of Peirce's three-way division among icons, indices and symbols. Peirce (Peirce 1994a) distinguishes among them in these terms:

	Sign is related to Object by…
icon	resemblance
index	co-presence or effect
symbol	law or convention

Robert Preucel and Alexander Bauer, in arguing for a semiotic—as opposed to structuralist—archaeology, highlight the importance of indexicality (Bauer 2002; Preucel 2006; Preucel and Bauer 2001). I am interested in the idea of indexicality because it positions archaeology to make a substantial contribution to new knowledge about the past, engaging in archaeological arguments rather than using archaeological objects to illustrate other kinds of arguments. There are several ways to think about blue-beads-as-signs and indexicality reminds us to approach the beads from multiple angles.

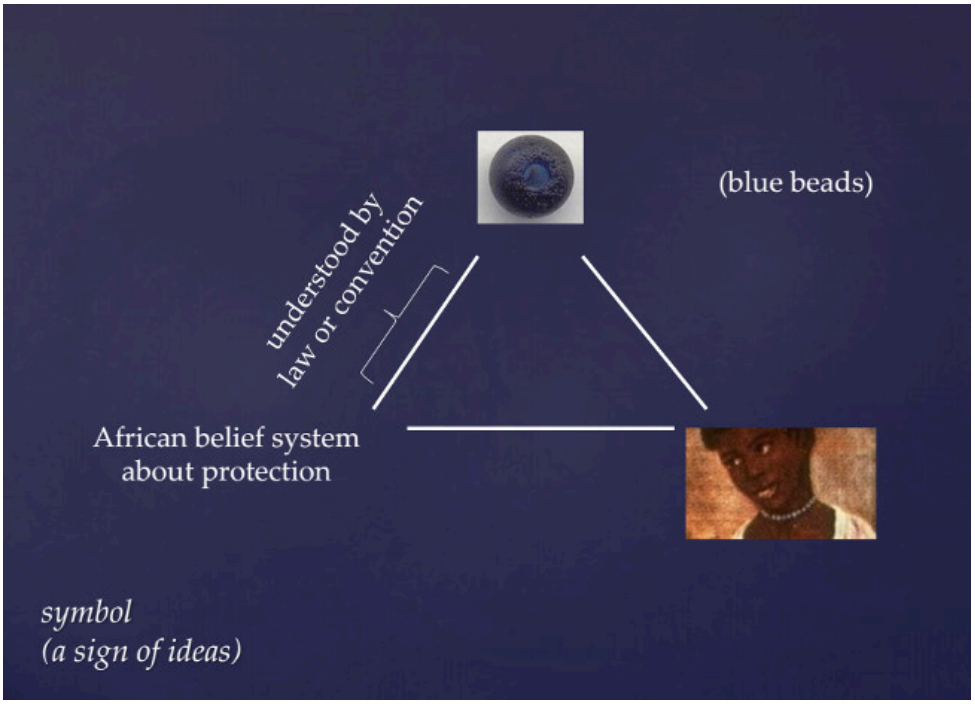

Figure 1. Blue beads seem to have signified in a symbolic manner for persons in the past. Images are details of Subspherical bead from Fairfield Plantation. Artifact ID 1020-081A-DRS—00153. Downloaded from the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery on August 17, 2016; and the Nurse from Alexander Spotswood Payne and His Brother John Robert Dandridge Payne, with Their Nurse, Attributed to the Payne Limner (American, active ca. 1780–1803), Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,

Richmond. Givt of Miss Dorothy Payne. Photo Katherine Wetzel © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

One could say that blue beads signify beliefs that people in the past held about protection; the relationship between blue beads and beliefs is, on Peirce's terms, conventional. The young woman in Figure 1 would be able to "read" blue beads that she encountered using that convention. However, emphasizing the symbolic mode does several things. As noted above, this orientation toward meaning (blue bead-as-symbol) facilitates the violation of our quite useful and interesting theories about how culture is transmitted and social identities are constructed. Instead, it reinscribes static, essentialist concepts of culture, wherein objects are taken to uncritically signify people or their qualities. Furthermore, it treats the blue beads as a problem for translation ("what Object is signified?"). Our apprehension of meaning is necessarily mediated by the testimony of the texts which answer that question. This scenario also conflates the meaning of blue beads to them-in-the-past with their meaning for us-in-the-present. But we-in-the-present encounter the beads in entirely different contexts; they are for us not the same kind of sign at all. The symbol-ness of the beads may loom large in our imaginations (Figure 2), but not necessarily for them-in-the-past. If our premise is true, the young woman in Figure 3 is not invoking an idea or belief about protection, but protection itself. Indexicality encourages us to think about alternatives to the problem of translation (i.e. what the beads are meant to say), alternatives such as pragmatic meaning (i.e. what the beads are meant to do).

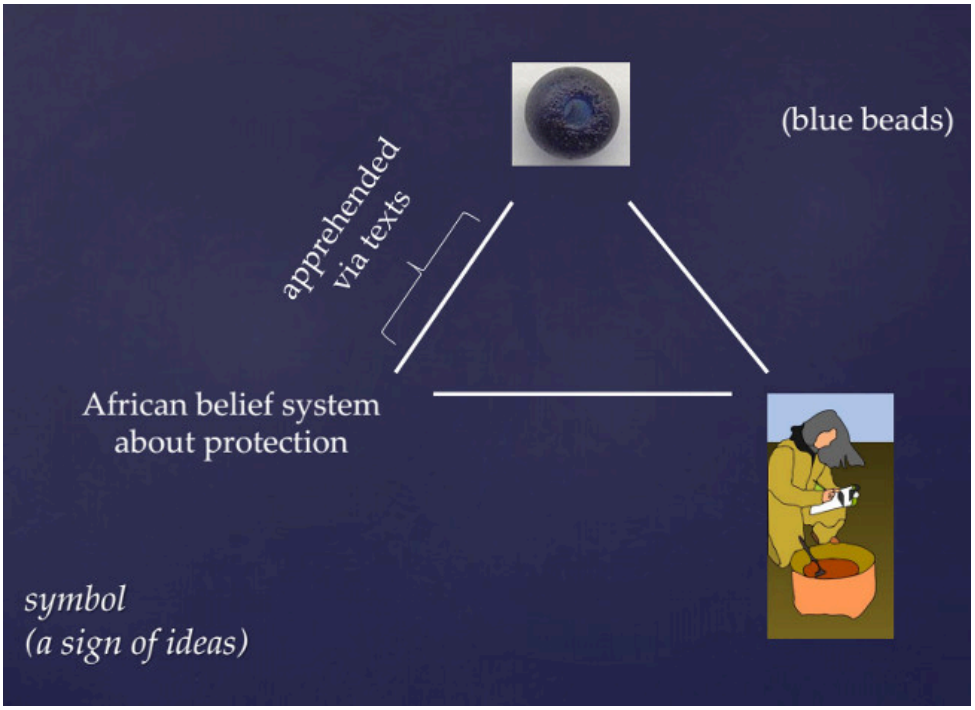

Figure 2. An archaeologist may also derive meaning from blue beads using a symbolic framework, but should we? Must we? Image credits as indicated in the caption for Figure 1.

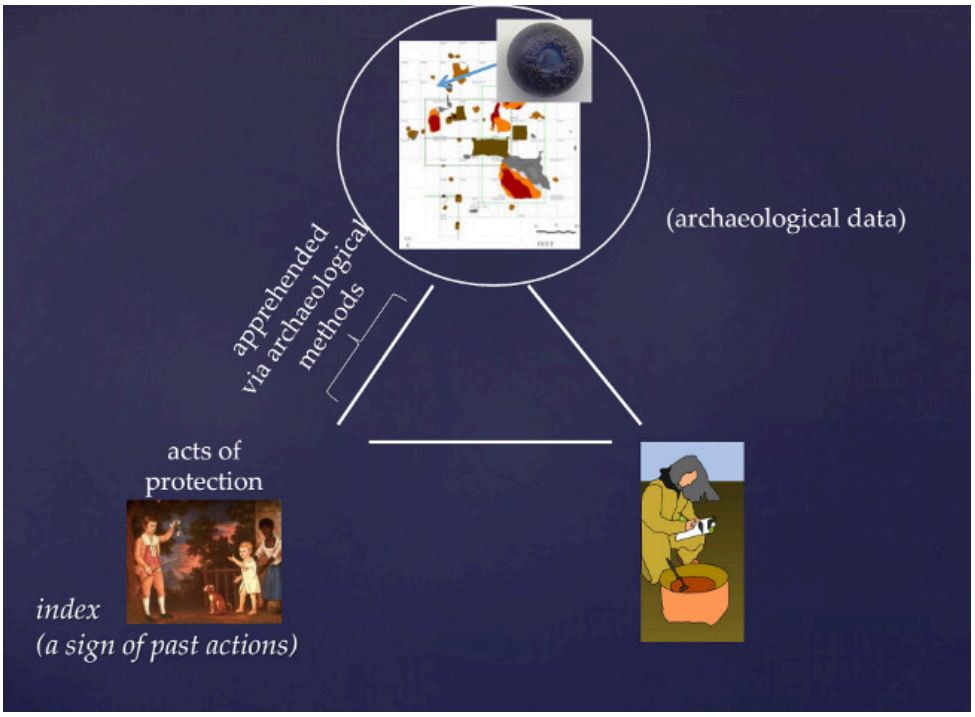

Figure 3. Archaeological meaning-making that treats blue beads as indices. Image credits as indicated in the caption for Figure 1, plus Composite Excavator's Plan Fairfield Quarter, Created by Jesse Sawyer 2006. Downloaded August 17, 2016 from The Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (http://www.daacs.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Fairfield_sitemap.pdf)

Most importantly though, an emphasis on indexicality—and by extension archaeological context, which is ultimately a concept of co-presence—leads us to frame the problem in a slightly different way, and use archaeological data in its solution. The archaeological data in which the blue bead is embedded becomes the Sign, which is "really affected by," modified by, acts of protection, the Object that we an Interpretant may apprehend via archaeological analysis. For example, Fairfield is the quarter with the most beads (n = 223) and the second highest proportion of blue beads among the 18 dwellings I examined in the overall comparative sample (DAACS 2010). Why might this be? What do contextual archaeological data offer that beads alone do not? First, we can consider the larger landscape of Fairfield and note that the quarter is by far the closest to an owner's dwelling of any in the sample (Agbe-Davies in press). The tradition is manifested at this site, not for its own sake, but because it addresses a specific threat on the landscape: the power of an owner. These beads, along with their contextual data, are signs that point to the actions of agents in the past, people who were doing things with things.

Consequences

> *Our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects…Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. –C.S. Peirce "How to Make our Ideas Clear"*

As with its colloquial meaning, "pragmatism," in formal terms, means that the consequences are the final measure of a thing (Peirce 1994b). There are several kinds of consequences, here neatly personified by the emphases of different pragmatist thinkers. We can ask ourselves, at various stages in the process of knowledge production: What should we expect next? What should we think? What should we do?

Based on the analyses glossed here, but considered in detail elsewhere (Agbe-Davies in press), I suspect that people used blue beads differently at Rich Neck than they did at Fairfield and possibly at Utopia II. What are the consequences of this finding?

	What should we…
...expect?	*to find other strategies for self-preservation in the archaeological record of Fairfield*
...think?	*that Rich Neck residents experienced threats differently from residents of Fairfield (and Utopia II?)*
...do?	*consider whether other intra-site variation replicates explain Utopia II's blue bead pattern.*

We might expect to find that the residents of Fairfield used multiple strategies for protection, prompting a renewed look at the contents of Feature 8, a pit highlighted in the excavator''s preliminary analysis for yielding an unusually high number of artifacts that, in other settings, have been taken to signal such things as *adornment*, *wealth* and *divination*.[4] We might think that the residents of the Rich Neck quarter experienced threats differently than the people living at either Fairfield or Utopia II. As for what we might do, we could take up the problem of the Utopia II beads: the structure in which the blue beads

concentrated was one where beads in general were relatively rare; but this structure is distinctive in other ways. It may have been the residence of a driver (enslaved) or overseer (free) (DAACS 2010). We have thus set the stage for the next cycle of investigation (Agbe-Davies under review; Agbe-Davies in press).

Rather than saying these blue beads mean that the people living here held beliefs rooted in African traditions, we say that if people used blue beads in ways consistent with African traditions, here's what we ought to expect/think/do. This reorientation towards consequences allows archaeology to play to its strengths. We don't recover the belief that blue beads offer protection, we find evidence that someone did something with blue beads. In this sense, we examine consequences—the archaeological record is what remains after a person has done some thing.

But, a careful reader might argue, we still don't know if blue beads really signify protection. Here, Peirce's notion of fallibilism serves us well. Acknowledging that we "do not satisfactorily know already," we take "the first step toward finding out" (Peirce 1994c:13). Instead of explaining the archaeological record by referring to the reported symbolic meaning of blue beads, we compare patterns and interpret them in light of other archaeological data to get at consequences.

In this fashion, meaning is located not in essential qualities (those of people or things), nor in some static idea of "culture," nor in the written record, but in the traces we recover of people acting on the world, in all of its messiness and confusion, trying to get something done.

Conclusion

> *The animals in totemism cease to be solely or principally creatures which are feared, admired, or envied: their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations…natural species are chosen not because they are "good to eat" but because they are "good to think." Claude Lévi-Strauss, Totemism*

So maybe blue beads are good to think, to the extent that they allow archaeologists to reflect on both how "they" did things with things and how "we" do things with things. The beads focus archaeologists' attention on social relations, just as animals do for Lévi-Strauss's totemic thinkers (Lévi-Strauss 1963:89). Thinking with the beads means starting with the semantic meaning, but the situating the beads in contexts (social and

archaeological) to understand what they were for. The beads point not only to “Africa” or “protection,” but to past acts, and thereby to past events and social relationships.

The structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and Saussure has reached deep into historical archaeology via the influence of pioneers like James Deetz (Deetz 1967; Deetz 1996). Preucel, however, has laid out a powerful argument in favor of Peirce’s semiotic (Preucel 2006). The semiotic does not stand in isolation; whether Peirce liked it or not, it was intricately bound up with a larger movement—pragmatism. Pragmatism was, itself, a precursor to the development of pragmatics, a branch of linguistics dealing with the relationship between sign vehicles and their interpretants (as opposed to among signs [syntax], or between sign vehicles and their objects [semantics]). As Nöth relates, Peirce recorded some preliminary thoughts on the idea that some utterances not only represent, but act in the world (Nöth 2011:167,190). JL Austin, in *How to Do Things with Words*, developed the idea of speech acts and described several kinds. For example, an illocutionary act does something in the world by having “a certain force in saying something.” A classic example is explained: “Thus ‘I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*’ has the effect of naming or christening the ship” (Austin 1975:120, 116, emphasis in the original). Of particular interest to the archaeologist is his third category: the perlocutionary act, “which is the *achieving* of certain *effects* by saying something” (Austin 1975:120, emphasis in the original). “I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*” is also a perlocutionary act insofar as it causes the crowd to erupt in cheers. Austin was concerned not only with what words mean, but what they do.

It is in *this* sense that we might finally develop a useful analogy between material culture and texts. Ideas traceable to Peirce, whether semiotics, pragmatism, or pragmatics, allow an archaeologist to invert the proposition that material culture is to be treated as a special (perverse?) kind of sign that deviates from an ideal exemplified by texts or other sets of words. Rather, texts are but one of many kinds of material culture (Deetz 1996:36), all of which not only mean but, potentially, do.

If archaeologists want to do things with things, especially to understand what others in the past did with things, we can make a few changes to our method. We can start with a critical reassessment of our problems and begin to treat our signs as indices of actions as well as law-like symbols. We can consider the consequences, both scientific (for knowledge in the present) and social (for effect in the past), of the acts that leave traces in the archaeological record. Part of this task includes embracing multiple stages of the scientific cycle, not only deduction. The archaeological record is a sign of past actions. The actions, themselves, were (are?) a sign of past social meanings, relationships, and structures. It is not enough to say that a blue bead means [fill in the blank]. That is only the beginning.

Acknowledgements. Many thanks to Alexander Bauer and Zoë Crossland, for the invitation to participate in this series of mind-expanding conversations. Paul Kockelman and Carol McDavid generously shared their own unpublished work on related themes. Michele Berger, Melissa Geil, Carol Magee, and Michelle Robinson provided valuable comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I have benefited greatly from conversations with, reading suggestions by, and advice from J. Eric Deetz, Jillian Galle, Robert Preucel, and Linda Stine.

Endnotes

1. For reports of the very public critiques of archaeology (and its sister discipline, anthropology) see (Jaschik 2014; Joyce 2013). For eloquent affirmations of the social value of archaeology see (Little 2007; Little and Shackel 2007; Sabloff 2008).↩

2. “Historical archaeology” is the term commonly used to refer to the archaeology of the modern world ca. 15th century to the present, (Hall and Silliman 2006; Little 2007; Paynter 2000).↩

3. “The remains of carnelian beads, Indo-Pacific Ocean cowry shells, an ebony ring, and a Ghanaian smoking pipe are artifacts found in slave contexts that indicate an African source,” a summary that points to the provenience of specific objects found in the Americas (Lee 1997:48) becomes, “Beads, cowrie shells, an ebony ring, and a Ghanian smoking pipe are artifacts found in slave contexts that indicate an African source (Lee 1997, p. 48),“ a validation of the association of shipwreck finds with the transatlantic slave trade (Henderson 2008:48).↩

4. Specifically, the pit “includes a high proportion of personal and decorative items, such as buttons, glass beads, cowrie shells, and possibly symbolic items such as a raccoon bacculum” (Brown 2006).↩

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